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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0055
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0122

UNCLAS KABUL 001797

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [AF](#) [KDEM](#)
SUBJECT: VERVEER PRESSES FOR JUSTICE FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

11. (U) SUMMARY: In June 24-26 meetings visiting Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer affirmed the strong U.S. commitment to Afghan women and pressed government officials and other leaders to address the extreme challenges confronting women. President Karzai defended his record on women's issues but admitted there were still problems and promised improvements if re-elected. Opposition candidates told Verveer they would prioritize increasing women's political participation and educational and economic opportunities. During a trip to Badghis province, the provincial governor and local women's affairs office director prioritized women's needs there as education and literacy training, economic opportunities, and health care. Women provincial council candidates cited security concerns but expressed determination to mount vigorous campaigns. Verveer also toured a women's prison, a domestic violence shelter, and met with women journalists and male and female Parliamentarians. Verveer and the Ambassador announced a 27 million dollar fund of small grants targeted to empower Afghan NGOs working on women's issues. Media coverage of the entire trip was positive.

Karzai: Defends his record, Promises to increase support to women if re-elected

12. (SBU) Verveer pressed Karzai on the plight of Afghan women urging him to do more. She noted that during her visit to Badghis province women were discouraged and pleaded with her to weigh in for them with Karzai. Verveer acknowledged there had been some improvements, but that in some ways it seemed women's rights were regressing. She cited Karzai's signing of the original Shia Family Law and the delays in his Cabinet's consideration of the draft domestic violence law. Verveer also observed that Karzai regularly meets with groups of men with barely any women present or engaged on important issues. Karzai agreed that many women were still not benefiting from his government's initiatives. He guaranteed, however, that the U.S. will be "surprised" at how much he will do for women if re-elected. Karzai claimed concern about the small number of women employed in professional civil service positions. He said he would explore an affirmative action program for women in order to increase the numbers.

MOJ: Shia Law re-draft will protect women's rights, but under pressure from religious conservatives

13. (SBU) Verveer told Minister Danish that a revised Shia Family Law in line with constitutional guarantees of gender equality and a strong domestic violence law were priority issues for the U.S. Danish reported the Ministry had almost completed its revision of the Shia Family Law. The Ministry had reviewed hundreds of pages of suggested amendments including those submitted by civil society. Danish had shared some of these changes with civil society leaders several days prior and described the leaders as 100 percent satisfied. Danish also said religious groups were pressuring

him and President Karzai to enact the original version of the Shia Family Law. MOJ had met four or five times with the Ulema Council. Danish expressed contempt for the women who had protested against the original version of the law. "If a doctor protested about a legal issue, the doctor's criticism would not be considered, because she does not have legal training. Thus, the women protesting the Shia law should not have spoken up." "There was no need for protests, and civil society's objections rather than the actual law caused all the problems,"⁸ he added.

¶4. (SBU) Verveer pressed the Minister several times to share the complete revision with national and international stakeholders prior to finalizing it. Danish would only commit to meeting again with Afghan women and civil society representatives. He specifically declined to share the amendments with internationals, citing concerns about provoking another public uproar. Danish said the draft Elimination of Violence against Women bill was with the Cabinet, and he expected the Cabinet would approve it.

Abdullah: Women's vigorous participation in the electoral process gives him hope

¶5. (SBU) Presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah acknowledged that Karzai's government had presented opportunities for women's advancement, but said Afghanistan was still far behind where he had hoped it would be. Women's enthusiasm for the electoral process was giving Abdullah and others hope for the future. Women were demanding progress in human rights issues such as domestic violence and increased representation at every level of government. If elected, Abdullah plans to allocate 30 percent of cabinet posts and civil service positions to women. He would give the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) additional authority to implement its programs and insist that other ministries implement their parts of MOWA's programs.

Ghani: Economic empowerment crucial for women; advocates decentralized government

¶6. (SBU) The greatest threat to Afghanistan comes from its current government, opposition candidate Ashraf Ghani told Verveer. Narcotics and the insurgency are only by-products of the government's weakness. Discussing his campaign platform, he advocated election of most local officials, transfer of 50 percent of the national budget to local governmental units, and clarification of property rights within municipalities. Many municipalities lost opportunities for business and market sites due to confusion over land titles. Increasing economic opportunities is the key to empowering women. Ghani advocated a "made by Afghan women" label as a marketing strategy. He also urged development of women's industries in the areas of jewelry production, fashion and embroidery, and animal husbandry.

Minister of Public Health: Significant progress; concrete plan for addressing women's health challenges

¶7. (SBU) Minister of Public Health Sayed Amin Fatimie said it will take a concerted and coordinated effort for different ministries and sectors to appropriately address women's health and mentioned partnering with the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Agriculture, and Religious Affairs as crucial. His ministry's main strategies and interventions for reducing maternal mortality include expanding coverage of quality health services, expanding community midwifery training, strengthening community-based services through community health workers (volunteers), and reinforcing community mobilization and behavior change to increase utilization of quality health services.

Badghis: Remote and poor but standing up for women

¶8. (SBU) Badghis Governor Delbar Arman, who accompanied the delegation to all Badghis meetings, told Verveer he was working hard to bring justice to all citizens, men and women.

Improved security is the most important requirement for improving girls' access to education, the first step in combating the traditional marginalization of women. Arman listed increased investment in the agriculture sector and establishing a source of potable water as two other priorities. He asked for machinery and irrigation technology in order to increase the province's wheat yield. Verveer emphasized the U.S. commitment to working with both men and women to improve women's social indicators. "If you don't work with men, you don't work with women," Arman agreed.

Badghis IEC: 11 out 47 provincial council candidates are women

¶9. (SBU) Eleven of the 47 candidates for the Badghis provincial council are women, the provincial Independent Election Commission (IEC) gender coordinator, Najima, told the delegation and an assembled crowd of local leaders. The IEC has two mobile voter registration teams—one registering men and one registering women. The province has 163 polling centers and 500 polling stations, of which 50 percent are for women and 50 percent for men. Forty-six percent of registered voters in Badghis province are women. Female provincial candidate Sherzad welcomed the delegation and identified the province's biggest challenges as insecurity and a weak economy. Another female candidate, Yaseema, asked Ambassador Verveer what her plan is for helping to bring a better future for Afghan women. "The best investment a family can make is to send their daughters to school," Verveer said. "The reason for our trip is to better understand how we can most effectively partner with Afghans to grow economic opportunities, improve access to health care, and reduce societal violence against women," she added. She also told the women that they needed to press the presidential candidates on their plans for women and their families.

Badghis Department of Women's Affairs: priorities are education, economic opportunities, and health; U.S. should turn attention to rural areas

¶10. (SBU) Badghis Department of Women's Affairs Director Halima Rahpyma identified the main problems facing Badghis women as forced marriages, lack of access to health care, insecurity, and poverty. Her office has conducted projects to address these problems including vocational and literacy training. Ambassador Verveer told the assembled women that Afghanistan cannot go forward if its women are left behind. "You are the key to our success," she added. Rahpyma identified priorities for international assistance to Badghis women as literacy and civics training for adults and increased access to education for girls, increasing employment opportunities, and health care. Several attendees emphasized that women in villages face many more challenges than women in the provincial capital and asked that the U.S. focus assistance efforts on rural areas.

Women's rights activist: Constitution is just a paper until the government puts it into action

¶11. (SBU) Women's rights activist Orzala Ashruf and Member of Parliament Fawzia Koofi highlighted an evening discussion of the way forward for Afghan women, chaired by UNAMA Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General Peter Galbraith. "The Constitution gives equal rights to men and women, but it is only a piece of paper until the government puts it into action," Ashruf said. The government hires educated women to be secretaries and other low-level employees, she noted. Ashruf also urged the Afghan government and its international partners to do more to support women at the district and village level in remote

areas. She also urged that the government give MOWA the authority and funding to implement its programs, rather than just make policy. MP Koofi urged the government to include women in any potential peace talks and noted the need to implement UN Resolution 1325 in that regard.

Domestic Violence Shelter and Women's Prison: two well-run organizations assisting victims of societal ills

¶12. (SBU) During Verveer's tour of the U.S. NGO Women for Afghan Women-run domestic violence shelter, several clients described fleeing forced marriages to much older men. A 17-year-old girl's family had forced her to marry when she was 11. Inmates at the U.S.-supported Kabul Women's Prison told Verveer they were satisfied with prison conditions and their treatment by prison officials. The inmates, serving three to five year sentences for adultery, seven years for narcotics, and 10-20 years for homicide explained that the prison offered literacy, computer, sewing, and beadwork instruction. In both venues, Verveer emphasized the strong U.S. commitment to addressing poverty and lack of access to education, factors which caused some women to end up in either a shelter or prison.

Media Coverage

¶13. (U) Media outlets reported widely and positively on the visit. The reports focused on Verveer's demand for increased women's participation and leadership in the next government and her re-affirmation of the USG's neutrality in the August election.
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